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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines some of the emotional issues that can interfere with teachers' professional skills and abilities to reflect on what they are doing in a non-emotional, non-judgmental way. For example, the recent move to include students with disabilities in mainstream classes has placed stress on many teachers, making them feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or unqualified. Though many teachers continue to function despite significant stress, they may carry with them emotional baggage regarding students, parents, and administrators who do not provide support or who place unrealistic demands on them. This emotional baggage often interferes with effective teaching and reflecting. Teachers can reflect on their teaching and their classroom management, but they must find the time and then deal with their emotions, exploring alternatives realistically when they are not upset or emotionally drained. Many teachers are caring individuals who truly want to make a difference in children's lives, but given the plethora of duties, obligations, and other responsibilities they have, they are often unable to adequately reflect on their teaching skills and strategies and thus are less able to deal with their students. (SM)

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## TEACHER EMOTIONS AND REFLECTIVE THINKING

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### Abstract

A crucial aspect of teaching is the ability of the teacher to reflect on what they are doing in the classroom, assess what works and what does not, and to make modifications in order to improve student learning. This paper will examine some of the emotional issues that interfere with a teacher's professional skill and ability to reflect on what they are doing well and their limitations to reflect in a non-emotional, non-judgmental way.

Much of the literature regarding teaching indicates that reflective teachers evaluate, review, and both formally and informally assess what they are doing, and what they are doing well or not so well. Reflective teachers take the time to ponder about their lesson plans, their students, their method of presentation, and their adjustments for students with handicapping conditions or disability. While this is a major part of teacher's professional duties and obligations, teachers rarely receive release time to perform this function and receive little if any recognition for reflecting on their teaching. While some schools may allow a teacher a "prep period" to grade papers, correct tests, write letters home to parents or consult with other teachers, little specific time is allocated for teacher to reflect on their practices and instructional methods.

Eby (1997) has written on the importance of reflective planning, teaching and evaluation indicating it's relevance to authentic teaching, learning and assessment. She has reviewed it's importance relative to lesson plans, technology and cooperative learning.

There are many emotional factors that also interfere with a teacher's ability to reflect on their pedagogy and instructional effectiveness. Some of these factors will be explored and examined, and some suggestions offered to help teachers cope with these interfering emotions and to help teachers devote more quality time to critical evaluation and assessment of their teaching methods.

Over the past twenty years, teachers have had to deal with an educational concept called "mainstreaming". Under this movement, students with disabilities have been placed in regular education classes, when in the past they would have been serviced in special education classes. This movement has resulted in more paperwork, I.E.P.'s ,

meetings and other administrative difficulties for teachers. Many teachers report exasperation, frustration and stress at having to deal with students who are not appropriate for the regular education classroom. Some students that are particularly violent or verbally abusive have evoked an emotional reaction from teachers. Physically assaulted teachers obviously have difficulty returning to school in the same mood and the assault may have unnerved them.

Some teachers find it increasingly difficult to concentrate and focus on lesson plans and experience difficulty reflecting on their normal classroom situation.

Reflective teaching is essential in the current educational atmosphere. A radical change is occurring in the targeted population. The children born to the techno-age are often well informed, understand sophisticated technologies, and are computer literate at a very young age. Blackboard and chalk, rote learning and workbooks are not the teachers best tools for our changing student population. The business of educating our youth is rapidly changing. Professional expertise is becoming necessary for all teachers. Reflection is becoming more and more imperative to service the needs of all students.

Inclusionary practices and the multitude of circumstances and students seen in the classroom can limit how effective a teacher feels they can be. Teachers must assess current teaching practices and create a means of facilitating effective education for all students represented in the classroom, these contextual constraints often create stress when teachers are dealing with limited time, resources, and the multitude of student needs seen in the classroom. Teachers have reported negative reactions to students termed “learning disabled” or “gifted”. However, these negative reactions are more

frequently concerns of meeting the very specific individual and specialized needs of these populations. How to be an effective teachers to ALL students represented in a classroom can seem a daunting task.

Some of the students who have been mainstreamed include children with learning disabilities, mental retardation, attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity, emotional disturbance, asthma, diabetes, autism, and other medically fragile conditions.

Shaughnessy (1996) has written on the fact that multiply handicapped children have begun to permeate the classrooms of America. Mahan (1985) has indicated that substance abused children are flooding our classrooms. Teachers who reflect on this current state of affairs may be depressed indeed and many verbalize their inability to deal with such children. Other teachers simply report being overwhelmed.

They attend workshops on learning styles, cooperative learning, multiple intelligences and a host of other approaches which are supposed to offer teachers assistance in dealing with unmotivated, recalcitrant, oppositional, defiant, negativistic, acerbic children and adolescents. Feeling overwhelmed, teachers are unsure how to teach such a wide diverse population of students. Often children from different racial, ethnic and poverty stricken backgrounds are included in a teacher's classroom, and teachers have difficulty reflecting on ways to help such students. It may be that they have never had any experiences working with these types of children and it may also be that teachers are apprehensive about their abilities to teach these children. Exasperated by their lack of skills in certain areas, teachers may become demoralized and be unable to adequately reflect on their teaching successes and may overfocus on their shortcomings or failures.

Teachers are often frustrated by parents who fail to provide the support necessary at home. Parental roles range from non-existent to ever-present. Overwhelmingly, teachers report that paradoxically, the parents of students that most need support are of the non-existent variety. This frustration often becomes outright anger, and the reflective processes often fall by the wayside. Teachers may encounter parents who blame the teacher for a student's low grades or failure in a certain class. These negative experiences often snowball and become problematic. Often they are cumulative.

The expectations placed on teachers by administrators often cause anxiety, apprehension and consternation. Administrators indicate that teachers should “consult”, “collaborate” and work together with other professionals such as speech therapists, diagnosticians, guidance personnel and social workers. Some teachers are fearful about said meetings and encounters. Some teachers have been attacked by said professionals, while others have sought assistance only to be rejected, and chagrined. Quality reflection cannot occur in an emotional turmoil.

### Teachers and Emotional Baggage

Teachers are human beings and as such experience a wide range of human emotions. Teachers have been susceptible to burn out, stress and other psychological concerns. Some teachers have friends and colleges with which they can seek support, and understanding. Some teachers find refuge in their church activities or after school hobbies. Sadly, other teachers turn to alcohol or withdraw into some other escapes.

Many teachers continue to function but carry with them “emotional baggage” regarding students, the frustration of dealing with some parents, and the

negative attitude of administrators and parents. Some teachers are extremely perplexed about the lack of administrative support of teachers when knife wielding students arrive at school, or when administrators fail to support teachers regarding decisions regarding grades or behavioral problems. This “ emotional baggage “ often interferes with effective teacher functioning and effective teacher reflecting. Sadly, some teachers simply “ burn out “ . Some truly professional teachers have sought counseling to cope with their feelings of stress, burn out, exasperation and frustration. Sadly, others wallow in their personal difficulties.

### Using Pockets of Time

Teachers can reflect on their teaching and their classroom management, but they must first find time and then deal with their emotions to explore alternatives and options realistically when they are not agitated, upset or emotionally drained or devastated. Teachers may need to allocate a specific time to visit a local coffee shop to engage in reflective thinking and perhaps take notes about other better ways to approach parents and students. Teachers may want to assess alternative ways to assess (perhaps via portfolio) and alternative ways to present material (via technology). Further, teachers may want to consider how realistic their ideas are about students and classroom management . Teachers may need to investigate their own emotional health following a violent confrontation with a student and even reconsider another vocation.

The Columbine high school massacre is a relevant example of the effects of violence on schools and communities. No job is worth a heart attack, yet some teachers continue to try to teach in spite of being verbally abused by students, and half heatedly supported by administrative personnel. Some teachers should reflect on what they are



able to do as they approach the age of 45 or 50 and reconsider their skills and abilities. Some teachers have been so angry, for so long that they are unable to see the situation with any degree of clarity and are thus unable to make prudent, judicious decisions regarding classroom management.

### The Emotional Life of Teachers

Many teachers are giving, caring individuals who truly want to make a difference in a child's life. However, given the plethora of duties, obligations and other responsibilities and duties teachers have, they are often unable to adequately reflect on their teaching skills and strategies, and are thus poorly unable to deal with their students. Often exams are given in anger as "busy work" and other teachers "dumb down" education (Sykes, 1987) in an effort to appease parents and receive some relief from stress.

Some teachers may be so emotionally drained and depleted as to be unable to reflect objectively on their situations. The changing educational needs of student, the inclusionary classroom combined with an urgent need for individualized education programs increases the need for professional expertise and planning. Teachers can collaborate with resource professionals or recruit parental support when available, continue to utilize professional development tools such as workshops, and foster the idea within their own teaching environment that time is necessary for quality assessment of the teaching and learning environment that they are creating.

Thoughtful, reflective and concerned professionals, evaluating, developing, planning, and designing effective teaching methods are crucial. Changing population needs are

driving the need for nonjudgmental, non-emotional assessment of methods utilized in the classroom. Such reflective activities are mandated in order to facilitate the many demands required of reflective classroom teachers.

### Summary and Conclusions

Reflective teachers, in general, engage in certain cognitive processes which facilitate good teaching. This reflection may include thinking about questions to ask, how to cope with discipline problems, how to maintain control of the classroom and how to deal with angry parents. Emotions may interfere with teacher's ability to calmly, quietly and professionally reflect on the teaching process. This paper has examined some of the issues relative to reflection and emotions and has explored concerns relative to teachers.

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